DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 703 SO 035 300

AUTHOR	Barrios, Sharon; Weber, Lori M.
TITLE	Recognizing Exemplary Student Writing: A Model for a Student Journal of Politics.
PUB DATE	2003-08-00
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (99th, Philadelphia, PA, August 28-31, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Course Descriptions; *Educational Benefits; Higher Education; Models; Political Science; *Politics; *Student Journals; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS	Authorship; *California State University Chico; *Writing Quality

ABSTRACT

To allow student writing to reach a broader audience, in 1999 political science educators and students at California State University Chico (CSUC) began a student journal in which exemplary student writing on political themes could be published. The resulting journal, "Studium: The California State University, Chico Student Journal of Politics," provides a variety of benefits to students. This paper addresses the benefits of writing assignments and how a student journal can enhance these benefits. The paper describes the structure and design of a course that produces a student journal. It states that now, in its fourth year, "Studium" has formally become a new course offering in the Department of Political Science at CSUC and its staff and budget have also grown. (BT)

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Recognizing Exemplary Student Writing: A Model for a Student Journal of Politics

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SO 035 300

Paper prepared for presentation at the
annual meeting of the American Political Science Association,
August 26–August 31, 2003, Philadelphia, PA

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Introduction

Writing assignments are common in most political science courses. But too often such assignments are used as primarily a way of assigning grades to students. As a result, both students and instructors come to view each student paper as a private communication between the two parties—a work with no future and an audience of one. In contrast, professors typically prepare their own writing in hopes of reaching a wider, professional audience. In order to allow student writing to reach a broader audience, in the fall of 1999 we were motivated to begin a student journal in which exemplary student writing on political themes could be published. The resulting journal, *Studium: The California State University, Chico Student Journal of Politics,* provides a variety of benefits to students. In this article, we address the benefits of writing assignments and how a student journal can enhance these benefits, and we describe the structure and design of a course that produces a student journal.

Benefits of Writing Assignments

The most typical purpose of writing assignments is evaluative; writing assignments give students a chance to display their knowledge and skills, and hence allow instructors both to assign grades to students and to estimate their own success in imparting information and achieving other educational objectives. However, it is not the case that every writing assignment must produce multiple drafts and hours of intense evaluation and guidance from the instructor, particularly if the primary objective of a given assignment is to test students' knowledge about a particular subject.

Beyond the evaluative objective, instructors may desire to achieve additional objectives with writing assignments. The ability to produce effective writing is itself an essential skill, and the development of this skill is correlated with the development of both critical thinking skills and with the increase in a student's comprehension of the relevant material. Writing, then, is more than a way of displaying what one has learned; it is itself a way of learning. As Bob (2001, 653) points out, "While writing and critical thinking skills arise independently, appropriate writing assignments offer an opportunity to simultaneously nurture both skills." Similarly, Londow (1993, 529) notes that writing can be "a valuable mode of learning in itself." To the extent that an instructor's focus is on assisting students in developing their depth of knowledge about particular issues, developing effective research and writing skills, and development of critical thinking and analytical abilities, there is reason to move beyond reliance on the single-draft assignment and consider projects that require students to engage in a writing and revision process that includes intense evaluation and feedback from one or more readers.

Despite their ubiquity, however, the manner in which writing assignments are used in the classroom does not always reflect a deeper understanding of these points. As various scholars have noted (Zeiser 1999; Fulwiler 1982), typical essay exams and term papers are single draft papers written for an audience of one (the teacher), with a single objective (to reveal knowledge of a particular subject), and a single reward (the grade). While these assignments do promote learning and can advance students' writing abilities, they have limitations. In particular, such limited assignments fail to offer an opportunity for students to fully develop their ideas through a

drafting and revision process that offers ample feedback and evaluation from the reader. Such a process illustrates to students that writing is an active, evolutionary process.

A student journal of political science, as we have conceived and implemented it, emphasizes this active, evolutionary process of writing and enhances instructors' ability to do this by providing a broader audience for student writing assignments and providing the assignments with a future—in a publication. In the following sections, we discuss the benefits of a student journal to student authors, student editors, and to students who read the journal. We will then turn to the production process of the journal, which we believe is necessary for providing the environment for this active, evolutionary process.

Benefits of a Student Journal to Student Authors

The first and most important benefit of a student journal is that it encourages students to subject their papers to significant rethinking, rewriting, and reevaluating, both before submission and then after the formal acceptance. For students to pay such extensive attention to their own writing is fairly rare. As Zeiser (1999, 593) asserts,

> When we write articles for publication or papers for conferences, we go through a process of thinking, writing, and revising, followed by more thinking, more writing, and more revising. In this way, we develop and improve our critical thinking and writing abilities. Yet, professors rarely ask their students to do the same… we fail to teach students the benefits of drafting and revising.

An explanation for the reluctance of many instructors to require multiple drafts from students is that the amount of evaluation and guidance required to make such assignments effective is very time-consuming. Some instructors may also be sympathetic to students who are concerned about being burdened with exceptionally demanding requirements. Thus, for instructors with many students and students with many units, the active process of thinking, writing, and revising may not be perceived as being worth the considerable effort and time that such a process demands. However, we have found that a significant number of students and professors are willing to devote this kind of effort when preparing student manuscripts for publication. The chance to present the results of their efforts to peers, and the knowledge that their work will undergo public scrutiny, seems to motivate students to rise to considerably higher levels of effort. Instructors, meanwhile, tend to find the pedagogical rewards of the process a sufficient motivation. Moreover, students' enthusiasm about the process tends to be rather infectious. It should also be mentioned that since the papers are selected through a competitive process, the selected papers tend to be of fairly high quality, and are thus perceived as being worthy of the extra attention paid to them.

In terms of the development of both writing skills and of skills that are related to writing, the benefits to student authors are clear. Student authors receive personalized, detailed feedback on how to strengthen their papers. They are given several chances to rethink and revise, and also incentives for doing so. Unlike the typical writing assignment, which is seen as finished once the due date is passed (so that instructor comments and suggestions are more often than not regarded

as essentially irrelevant), the process of preparing a paper for publication generally requires several rounds of criticism and response.

Further benefits of a student journal extend to the student authors. The typical class assignment has significant limitations, as Fulwiler (1982, 22; cited in Zeiser 1999, 593) points out: "While students do learn and process information in performing these assignments, none of these school writing assignments promote writing primarily for the sake of the learner, and none of them encourages students to make school knowledge personally their own." Ironically, perhaps, publication of students' work seems to increase the sense of ownership that the student author feels in regards to their own work. Their work is no longer just an assignment prepared for a private audience of one—the instructor. Instead it is a public record of the students' own ideas, thoughts, arguments, and original findings or analysis. As a result of publication, student authors report feeling a remarkable sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for writing and that goes well beyond the pleasure of receiving a good grade or praise from an instructor. Finally, the student authors benefit from being able to reference their publications on resumes and graduate and law school applications. In fact, we have received feedback on how these publications have been a key factor in student authors' obtaining jobs upon graduation.

Benefits of a Student Journal to Students as Editors

The benefits for student editors are even more profound. Student editors are required to assess the paper closely, offering the student author personalized, detailed feedback. This step in the process arguably requires more of the student editor than the student authors. As editors, they must consider multiple aspects of the paper, including many aspects they may rarely have explicitly considered in their role as student writers: Is the theme of the paper appropriate for the journal (that is, is it about politics or political science)? Is it clear what this paper is about? What about the structure, organization, and content of the paper? Is the purpose of the paper explained in the introduction? Does the writer make his or her case? Are the arguments and evidence clearly presented and thoroughly developed? Is there a clear and logical flow of ideas and arguments throughout the paper? Does the conclusion fit the data? Is the paper properly cited, in the prescribed style? Are there grammar or punctuation problems? And so on.

Of course, it is not enough that students uncover difficulties in the papers they are assigned. The second and more important component of their task is to be able to suggest solutions, and they must learn how to do so in a diplomatic manner. For example, if they have diagnosed that a particular argument is weak and unconvincing, the editor must be able to explain where the argument fails. The student editor may point out to the author that the argument needs to be more specifically articulated, supported by statistical or other factual information, or illustrated or illuminated by an example or particularly pithy quotation from an appropriate source. Providing possible solutions, and doing so in a tactful manner, develops student editors' diplomacy skills in dealing with their peers—skills that will also be invaluable in the workplace.

Through this process student editors, along with the student authors, grow to appreciate and understand the role of diligent redrafting to improve a paper. They see how an author's own

arguments develop, thinking clarifies, and knowledge of their subject matter deepens because of the process of revision. The ultimate lesson is that effective writing and critical thinking both improve with effort. Finally, the particular advantage of this sort of process is that it allows the lesson to be learned actively, by doing, rather than passively, by being told.

Moreover, in the paper selection process, the student editors will inevitably read about issues they may not have been exposed to in their regular classes or through their own pursuits. Particularly in a discipline such as political science, where even students at the undergraduate level may have a focused specialty, majors may not acquire general knowledge of those key issues addressed within the discipline. The process of selecting papers for the student journal helps to rectify this problem. During this stage, the student editors are responsible for carefully reviewing dozens of submissions that address wide ranging political issues from varying political viewpoints. Student editors may read anything from a short position paper by a Model United Nations student on establishing stability in the Balkans to a film review that discusses liberation theology to a twenty-five-page research paper written by an advanced graduate student on Californians' attitudes on immigration.

Finally, in addition to the exposure editors receive to a wide range of topics, student editors are also exposed to a variety of writing styles, techniques, and assignments. For example, among the papers submitted during the most recent selection stage, student editors reviewed a paper that was primarily a descriptive report on the history of the friendship between two important figures in the women's rights movement. They also reviewed legal case briefs, written in a specialized format, with the distinctive citation style of case law. They read a paper promoting the democratization of policing presented in the traditional style of analytic philosophy. They assessed several analytical book and film reviews. And they examined lengthy papers reporting the findings of students' original quantitative or qualitative research on topics like congressional members' attitudes toward their constituents or the deregulation of electric utilities.

Benefits of a Student Journal to Students as Readers

Once the journal is published and distributed, its benefits extend beyond the student authors and editors. The published papers expose the students reading the journal to the wide variety of topics addressed and approaches utilized across our discipline. Furthermore, the readers are exposed to the exemplary work of their peers, which we have found provides inspiration for their own work.

Moreover, we have found a significant benefit of the journal for student readers is that the papers serve as models produced for specific courses. Whether students stumble across the examples themselves or professors actually assign journal papers that were written in their courses, the papers published in the journal can help alleviate the ambiguity and uncertainty that arises when students are asked to produce papers following a particular professor's guidelines or expectations. They can turn to the journal with some confidence, knowing that they have a quality example of the type paper they are expected to produce. As Londow (1993, 529) notes:

"Above all, students need models of the *kinds* of writing they are being asked to do; here, past successful student papers are invaluable."

Organizing and Producing a Student Journal of Politics

Again, we feel that the particular advantage of the *Studium* project is that it allows the students to learn actively, by doing, rather than passively, by being told. The limited nature of many writing assignments in the typical classroom fail to offer an opportunity for students to fully develop their ideas through a drafting and revision process that offers ample feedback and evaluation from the reader. Such a process illustrates to students that writing is an active, evolutionary process. However, this active, evolutionary process needs to be supported by an environment that facilitates its occurrence, which the traditional classroom tends to lack, often due to lack of resources and large size.

While there are numerous ways to produce a student journal, we feel our production process for *Studium* is necessary for providing the environment for this active, evolutionary process for several reasons. First, we created *Studium* as a hybrid between a student organization and a course. This way we are able to capitalize on the hands-on nature of student organizations but maintain the educative process of the classroom, since most of the student editors are learning many of the skills needed (copyediting, peer evaluations) for the first time. Second, we feel it is necessary to keep the size of the course small (approximately between 7-15 students) in order to capitalize on the highly interactive nature of small groups. Third, we have found the contact with other students and courses at the university to provide an important interdisciplinary component, broadening the learning experience beyond the political science department. Fourth and finally, we consciously chose to make *Studium* a yearlong project to enable us to focus not only upon purely producing the journal, but also to maximize learning along the way. The additional time is necessary to allow student editors to practice their newly acquired skills prior to consulting with student authors. The time is also necessary to provide the student authors with time to redraft their work, both on their own initiative prior to submission to the journal and with guidance from student editors after acceptance for publication.

The above reasons for our student journal project are evident in the history behind how *Studium* has developed over the past four years of its existence, and these reasons are evident in our current production schedule. We will now briefly describe the history and production of *Studium*.

History of *Studium: The California State University, Chico Student Journal of Politics*

The first journal went into production in early winter of 1999. Since it takes considerable bureaucratic effort to implement a new course, we began *Studium* with three students and gave them internship credit for their work. In the first year of production, *Studium* ran on a shoestring budget of $300, which was a grant from our political science department. This budget allowed us to pay for printing costs, but nothing else. The other work of the journal (the call for papers, paper selection, formatting, editing, and cover design) fell upon our staff.

That first year experience taught us that having our student staff produce the entire journal was too much. In the second and third years we made a variety of changes. First, we doubled the size of our student staff to six students. Second, we arranged for an English editing course to assist in the first-run editing of the selected papers. The course instructor incorporated the project into his regular course curriculum. And third, we consulted with a communication design course to produce a cover design for the journal. The competition to have a cover design selected for our journal cover has become a regular and rewarding part of the course curriculum. Utilizing other courses at the university provided us with production assistance and provided the students in other courses with a unique hands-on learning activity.

The assistance with journal production was needed so that our student editors could take on a new task beginning in the second year—getting funding for the journal. Student editors were involved in writing and securing several internal grants for the production of *Studium*. Students attended a grant-writing workshop sponsored by the Emergency Services Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that secures grant money for emergency services in under-funded rural northern California communities. With the additional grant money, we were able to do two things. First, we hired graphic design students at CSUC to format the journal. Second, we were able to conduct a small conference, with other northern California student journals in English and history, which coincided with a first annual authors' reception to celebrate the release of the journal in the late spring of 2001.

Now in our fourth year, *Studium* has formally become a new course offering in the Department of Political Science at CSUC. We also began the year with a larger staff of ten students, and a bigger budget of $3300. The funds are supplied by an internal grant received from a program that distributes student activity fees to "instructionally related activities."[i] We continued collaborating with other university courses and students for the cover design, editing, and formatting of the journal. However, we are no longer utilizing the student-editing course in the English department, since we have opted to teach our own staff copyediting skills instead. The impact of the journal upon our department and university is really starting to take effect as the word spreads among students and faculty. In fact, in the spring of 2002, the *Studium* staff was asked to take part in producing a journal from a conference of student research papers run by the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences at CSUC. The result, *Proceedings*, showcased student talent in yet another publication at the university.

Production Schedule

The production of *Studium* is a yearlong project that begins in September and ends in late May. The students work independently and with each other in weekly meetings to complete all tasks and meet deadlines in accordance with the schedule in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Production Schedule for Student Journal Course

September to November

- Set yearly goals
- Establish a production schedule
- Design promotional materials
- Write grant proposals
- Attend editing workshops conducted by various faculty members from the Departments of English and Political Science
- Circulate flyers around campus and letters to instructors announcing the first call for papers (at CSUC and other universities)
- Begin reviewing submitted papers

November to February

- Finish reviewing papers
- Select final papers to be published
- Meet individually with student authors to assist them with editing
- Meet with the graphics design class to select the journal cover design

February to May

- Complete journal layout
- Performs the final editing
- Submit final copy to the printers
- Organize and host an authors' reception
- Distribute copies of the journal to student authors and sponsoring instructors, university libraries, participating schools, and alumnae

From September to November, the student journal editors are involved in hands-on activities typical of student organizations, including promoting the journal and soliciting papers from students for submission. However, the most significant work in this time period is the classroom component—editing workshops to introduce students to the challenging task of reading, commenting, and editing the variety of writing produced on politics. From November to February, the main activities of the editorial staff include the final selection of papers and copyediting. Finally, February to May involves editors in the important task of meeting with the student authors, the final proofs of the journal copy, organizing and hosting an authors' reception, and the most exciting part—distributing the final journal. As aforementioned, we believe that this yearlong production process is necessary to provide the full benefits to student editors, and even with the entire academic year at our disposal, we still feel the pressure of deadlines, particularly from February to May. However, this deadline pressure only contributes to the hands-on nature of the project and contributes to its ultimate preparation of students for the workplace and, possibly, for graduate school.

Conclusion

Since *Studium* began, the student editors have invested considerable time and effort in the project. Based on the future plans they have for the journal, they are willing and eager to do even more. Their energy and enthusiasm is both deeply rewarding and contagious. We are

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expanding the journal to include more student papers—including those from students at other universities, editorial comments on each paper that explain the course assignment that inspired the particular paper and where in the field of political science this kind of work is situated, and a commentary section where selected authors are invited to comment on specific political issues. We are also hoping to conduct a journal conference in the future to network with other student journals and those interested in starting a student journal. Finally, the students are attempting to expand the interdisciplinary scope of the journal. In addition to continuing the collaboration with a graphics design class, the student editors are hoping to work with students in the Art department to design political cartoons and illustration for the journal.

Overall, a student journal gives student authors a chance to publish their papers in a peer-reviewed journal and to reference their publication on resumes and graduate or law school applications. It also gives other students an opportunity to read their peers' work. Moreover, it gives the student editors the chance to read, evaluate, and edit a wide array of papers, and hence engage student editors, as well as student authors, in writing as an active, evolutionary process. Moreover, student readers are provided with the exemplary work of their peers on which they can model their own work. In short, for all those involved, a student journal, both as a production process and a publication, provides inspiration.

Endnotes

[1] The California State University system sets aside student fee money for "instructionally related activities." The most common examples of these type of activities are debate teams, marketing teams, and, in the political science department, the Model United Nations team.

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